



Martin Luther King Jr. in Jefferson County Jail,
Birmingham, Alabama, November 3, 1967

Teaching MLK's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" by Dr. Sam Lackey

In the fall of 2009, I was 25 years old and fresh out of my Master's program at the College of Charleston in the low country of South Carolina. In desperate need of work, I accepted an adjunct English 101 instructor position at nearby Trident Technical College. Trident has a majority African-American student body, and its main campus is located in North Charleston, an economically-disadvantaged, majority-black city. As a white kid from the suburbs who had never been in the minority anywhere, at any time, this represented a major culture shock.

Much to my surprise, most of my students accepted me, and we got along well together. My inexperience often showed, and a few made fun of my youthful appearance, but it was great otherwise. When designing my syllabus in August, I had selected Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from A Birmingham Jail" as one of our readings. It was in the

textbook, and I was largely following an old syllabus given to me by an older instructor, so initially I didn't think much about its inclusion. But as the day to discuss it approached, I grew nervous. A white guy teaching a predominantly black class about Dr. King? I had never even read the text; it was never assigned in my South Carolina public schools, and I had never bothered to pick it up on my own time. I better have an excellent lesson plan, I told myself.

So, I read the letter, took copious notes, and then painstakingly constructed a lesson. I made sure to present the text as a piece of rhetoric, an expertly-crafted argument designed to rebut each criticism made by the white clergymen who opposed Dr. King's methods. I made sure to discuss the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, explain the concept of nonviolent direct action, and break down the references to Thomas Aquinas, Paul the Apostle, and Martin Buber. I laid out all of King's key claims in bullet-point form so we could examine each one. I was especially fond of his point about time – “We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability” – so I made sure to include a prompt about that. In short, I designed a good lesson. Then I went to class and promptly threw it out the window.

We still talked about some of the things I had planned, and we definitely framed the letter as an eloquent, well-supported argument. But I saw quickly that I didn't need to say a whole lot. Instead, I listened. I listened to Alma, who was old enough to actually remember the Civil Rights Movement, as she shared a vivid personal memory of the day Dr. King was assassinated. I listened to Shanard, a young ex-football player from North Charleston High, talk about the admiration he felt for those nonviolent demonstrators, and I listened to Daniel, who was about my age, talk about his previously-held preference for the teachings of Malcolm X and how he had come to see that both men offered hope and wisdom. I listened to my students discuss their own experiences growing up black in the South, about what had changed since the 60s and what hadn't. I listened to a story about a student placed under arrest for trying to get into her grandmother's house after she forgot her key. She lived there but still spent the night in jail. I listened to some of the older students reflect on the recent election of Barack Obama and what it meant to them.

Not everyone in class read “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in the same way, and not everyone was equally enthusiastic about it, but that day we had one of the best discussions I’ve ever participated in. I entered the classroom intent on teaching my students about King and his rhetorical strategies. But I left realizing that the best someone like me could do, on a day like that, was simply to listen, learn, and remember the reverend’s assurance that “oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever.”

Read MLK’s brilliant letter here: [“LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”](#)

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